

Mental Health: It's Part of College Life

Purpose: To give college students like you ideas for generating mental health awareness on campus.

Each year, approximately 4 million students like you enroll in college for the first time. Most of you are also on your own for the first time. With this freedom comes added pressures and anxieties—such as trying to belong in a new setting, keeping up with schoolwork, etc.

Sometimes these pressures can be overwhelming. Unfortunately, a fear of seeking help is common on college campuses, where the need to “fit in” is so strong.

The stigma and discrimination that surround mental health problems are major reasons that people do not seek treatment. In fact, while an estimated one in five Americans 18 and older—which translates to more than 54 million Americans—will experience mental health problems in any given year¹, fewer than 8 million will seek treatment.²

Also, stigma's impact is felt by those with mental health problems in other ways. They may fear losing supportive relationships with family members and friends at the times they badly need them. They may fear requesting accommodations for their illness because professors may perceive them as incapable, and, without accommodations, their student performance may be negatively impacted. They may also fear expulsion from school.

How Healthy Is College?

Suicide, the eighth leading cause of death for all Americans, is the second leading killer of college-age individuals. College-age adults are especially vulnerable to mental health problems, in part because many such problems first emerge in the late teens or early 20s. Overall, an estimated 27 percent of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 have diagnosable mental health problems³.

According to a study of college freshmen, their feelings about their physical and emotional health hit record lows in 2001. (The downward trends occurred before September 11.) For example, the percentage of freshmen who reported feeling that there was a very good chance they would seek personal counseling while attending college reached a 28-year high at 6.6 percent. Nearly 20 percent of first-year male students reported feeling frequently overwhelmed by what they had to do, as did more than 35 percent of first-year female students⁴.

How Can You Generate Awareness on Campus?

By teaming up with a school's campus counseling services, psychology club (e.g., Psi Chi), office of disability, office of student affairs, office of diversity or other groups, students can raise awareness of mental health problems and the importance of good mental health—especially during May (Mental Health Month) and the first week in October (Mental Illness Awareness Week).

In addition, these ideas have been used on college campuses across the country:

- **Add signage to high-traffic areas.** Harvard University students wrote their stories about dealing with mental health problems (using just a black marker on a white board) and displayed them in the school's science center, where there was a lot of student traffic. You can also put statistics ("1 in 5 of us will experience a mental health problem") or quotes ("Mental Health Recovery Happens") on these signs and display them on campus.
- **Make a presentation** to your psychology class and/or to other students in departments related to mental health—e.g., nursing or biology. Ensure that the future leaders are familiar with mental health issues.
- **Incorporate mental health into freshman orientation.** Many new students experience a lot of stress and anxiety. See if you can schedule a speaker, distribute brochures or show a video on mental health issues.
- **Write a letter to the editor** of your school newspaper. Tie your letter into finals time, when stress is highest; or write at the beginning of the year, when new students arrive, or at the end of the year (May Is Mental Health Month).
- **Get your message on the airwaves.** Ask your campus radio station to highlight mental health issues by airing a public service announcement (PSA).
- **Train campus leaders.** Conduct mental health education and training for resident assistants and fraternity/sorority leadership. In 2001-2002, The Campaign for America's Mental Health conducted "Finding Hope and Healing" trainings for these audiences at campuses across the country.

- **Show a movie** that spurs conversation around mental health issues. Most important, show a movie that depicts reality, not one that buys into the stereotypes. Movies to consider: *Girl, Interrupted*; *A Beautiful Mind*; *Benny and Joon*; *Ordinary People*; and *Shine*.
- **Offer free mental health screenings.** Work with your school's counseling services to conduct voluntary screenings for depression, eating disorders, and drug/alcohol and/or anxiety disorders. Local mental health organizations should be able to help you set these up as well.
- **Organize a run/walk.** Every year, *Active Minds on Campus at the University of Pennsylvania* (an affiliate of *Active Minds on Campus*, a national organization) organizes a "Stamp Out Stigma" run. The national organization works with colleges around the country to sponsor mental health runs (e.g., *Active Bodies for Active Minds* at Duke University). It's a great way to engage the general student population. (Consider teaming up with a local running club to recruit runners.)
- **Organize a benefit concert.** The Harvard Mental Health Group brought together the school's talented classical, jazz and folk artists to participate in "Melodies of the Mind," a concert that benefited a national mental health organization.
- **Organize a "De-Stress Fest."** Every semester, Metro State College of Denver offers a day when the student lounge is transformed into a haven for unwinding and learning self-care. With the student health center, they invite massage therapists, aromatherapists, acupuncturists, biofeedback technicians, nutritionists, touch therapists and Tai Chi specialists who provide nontraditional techniques of stress reduction. The center also sets up a "relaxation booth" where students engage in "Massage for the Masses," presenting free yoga and massage as a means to reduce stress.
- **Establish your own group.** National organizations like *Active Minds, Inc.* and *Mentality* help mobilize students to create their own group on campus.

"Making participation enjoyable, publicizing events, and recruiting others are central to the effectiveness of your events," says Alison Malmon, founder of *Active Minds on Campus*.

Which Organizations Can Help?

[Active Minds on Campus](#), a national organization, is specifically focused on college mental health issues and helping colleges create campaigns to counter stigma and discrimination. So is [Mentality](#), a group dedicated to raising awareness about mental health and challenging the stigma and discrimination surrounding mental health problems. Its Web site is aimed at students and faculty starting or running advocacy groups on their own college or university campuses. National organizations such as [National Alliance on Mental Illness \(NAMI on Campus\)](#), the [National Mental Health Association](#) (Finding Hope and Help), and the [National Mental Health Awareness Campaign](#) (Change Your Mind) have college campaigns and provide ideas and materials for college students. The [Jed Foundation](#) is an organization committed to reducing the youth suicide rate and strengthening the mental health safety net provided to college students nationwide.

The resources named here are neither an exhaustive list nor imply endorsement by SAMHSA or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Free teleconference training on this topic is available at <http://www.stopstigma.samhsa.gov/archtel.htm>. To download complete presentations and listen to the audio recordings, scroll to **Combating Stigma on Campus**.

Also, articles, fact sheets, resource organizations and other materials on this topic are available at http://www.stopstigma.samhsa.gov/topics_materials/education.htm.

For more information about how to address discrimination and stigma, contact the SAMHSA Resource Center to Address Discrimination and Stigma (ADS Center) <http://stopstigma.samhsa.gov>, e-mail stopstigma@samhsa.hhs.gov or call 800-540-0320, a program of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services.

¹ <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/statisticsmenu.cfm>

² Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General (1999)

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http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=NAMI_on_Campus&Template=/TaggedPage/TaggedPageDisplay.cfm&TPLID=19&ContentID=12235

⁴ http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/norms_pr_01.html